

# Consonance



## DEFINITION

What is consonance? Here's a quick and simple definition:

Consonance is a [figure of speech](#) in which the same consonant sound repeats within a group of words. An example of consonance is: "Traffic figures, on July Fourth, to be tough."

Some additional key details about consonance:

- Consonance occurs when *sounds*, not letters, repeat. In the example above, the "f" sound is what matters, not the different letters (such as "ph") used to produce that sound.
- Consonance does not require that words with the same consonant sounds be directly next to each other. Consonance occurs so long as identical consonant sounds are *relatively* close together.
- The repeated consonant sounds can occur anywhere within the words—at the beginning, middle, or end, and in stressed or unstressed syllables.

## Consonance Pronunciation

Here's how to pronounce consonance: **kahn**-suh-nince

## Consonance vs. Assonance

Consonance is nearly identical to another figure of speech called [assonance](#), with one critical difference: consonance has to do with repeated *consonant* sounds (i.e., non-vowel sounds), whereas assonance has to do with repeated *vowel* sounds.

- **Consonance is repetition of consonant sounds:** "Zach sneezed when he heard jazz music."
- **Assonance is repetition of vowel sounds:** "Hey, wait! Don't blame me! Nate and James are the perpetrators!"

## Consonance vs. Alliteration

[Alliteration](#), like consonance, is a figure of speech that involves the repetition of sounds. Consonance and alliteration differ, however, in two key respects.

- **Types of repeating sounds:** Consonance involves the repetition of only consonant sounds, whereas alliteration can involve the repetition of *either* vowel sounds or consonant sounds.
- **Position of repeating sounds:** The repeating sounds of consonance can occur anywhere in a word, whereas the repeating sounds of alliteration must occur either in the first syllables of words or in the stressed syllables of words.

In practical terms, these rules mean that consonance can sometimes be a form of alliteration, but isn't always.

## Consonance That Is Also Alliteration

Here are two examples of consonance that are also examples of alliteration. In the first example, the consonance occurs at the beginnings of words. In the second, consonance occurs on the stressed syllables of words (note that the "d" sound in "medallion" and "conduct" falls on the **stressed** syllables.)

- Be back soon, Barry! Bye-bye!
- Did Dan get a medallion? He was doing his duty! Oh well, conduct him to the stage.

## Consonance That Is NOT Also Alliteration

In the example below, consonance is *not* also alliteration, because the repeating consonant sounds almost never occur on either the first or stressed syllables (which is required for alliteration).

- Tiffany's offensive remarks disturbed Jeffrey and the other staff members.

If you read this example aloud alongside the examples that *are* alliteration, you'll sense that, while both have repeating consonant-sounds, the examples that are also alliteration have a kind of rhythm to them that non-alliterative consonance lacks.

## Consonance and Rhyme

Consonance also plays a role in [rhyme](#). Rhyme is the repetition of identical sounds, usually (but not always) located at the ends of words. Rhymes can be either repeated consonant sounds or vowel sounds (or combinations of the two). A rhyme, then, *can* be consonant, but not *all* rhymes are consonant. Here's an example of two different instances of consonance functioning as rhyme:

There once was a teacher named Bill  
Who placed his teapot on the sill:  
The students took aim  
With their pens, without shame,  
Crying, "Bill! It's your pot you must fill!"

Lines one, two, and five end with an "L" sound, and lines three and four with an "M" sound. Both of these sound-clusters are rhymes as well as examples of consonance.



## EXAMPLES

Consonance is common in all sorts of writing, including poetry and prose literature, as well as song lyrics.

### Consonance Examples in Literature

In both poetry and prose, consonance can give language a musical element, as well as emphasize sounds or words that resonate with the main ideas or themes of the work. When consonance is also alliterative, it can add rhythm to the text, too.

#### Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself" (1892)

This famous poem by Walt Whitman is an enormous catalogue of what he sees and hears and feels. The consonant repetition of the "s" sound heightens the sonic and specifically musical quality of the poem, so that the poem mimics the very activity it describes: singing.

I celebrate myself, and sing myself, / And what I assume you shall assume ...

Note that, because the "s" sounds occur either at the beginnings of words or in their stressed syllables below, this is also an example of alliteration.

#### Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

Spoken by [Hamlet](#), the Prince of Denmark, these lines use consonance to make the language more incisive. The dark joke Hamlet is making is that his mother has committed incest by marrying his father's brother.

A little more than kin, and less than kind.

#### Sir Phillip Sidney's "Sonnet 2"

The use of consonance below gives the lines a greater sense of cohesion and gravity, demonstrating just how dire are the circumstances being described. The speaker really believes that his heartache is like a physical wound.

Not at the first sight, nor with a dribbed shot,  
Love gave the wound, which, while I breathe, will bleed ...

#### Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*

In this line from chapter 9 of [Moby-Dick](#), the "s" and "h" sounds mirror the activity of the scene—singing—by making the prose musical.

Nearly all joined in singing this hymn, which swelled high about the howling of the storm ...

#### Psalm 23 of the King James Version of the Bible

The repetition of the awkward "th" sound in this passage means that the prose moves at a slower pace—just try reading it out loud and you'll see that the difficulty in pronouncing the consonant sounds

physically slows you. This mirrors the slowness and care with which one might walk through the "valley of the shadow of death."

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff,  
they comfort me.

#### John Milton's *Paradise Lost*

In these lines from book 1 of [Paradise Lost](#), Milton's complex use of consonance demonstrates his masterful command of the English language.

Of Man's first disobedience, and the fruit  
Of that Forbidden Tree, whose mortal taste  
Brought Death into the World, and all our woe,  
With loss of Eden, till one greater Man  
Restore us, and regain the blissful Seat ...

### Consonance Examples in Music

Since consonance is a sound-based device that can make language sound musical, it should be no surprise that songwriters use it all the time in their music.

#### Woody Guthrie, "The Biggest Thing That Man Had Ever Done"

The American folk musician Woody Guthrie uses consonance on the "d," "m," and "b" sounds to create a bouncing, humorous, re-imagined of major events in world history.

I beat the daring Roman, I beat the daring Turk,  
Defeated Nero's army with thirty minutes' work,  
I fought the greatest leaders and I licked them everyone,  
And that was about the biggest thing that man had ever done ...

#### Bob Dylan, "Subterranean Homesick Blues"

Dylan's song is a bounding, leaping, joyful composition of sounds and ideas, and the consonance of "f" and "p" and "t" and "b" sounds below shows his playfulness as he paints a scene of what might otherwise seem like desperation and displacement.

Maggie comes fleet foot  
Face full-a black soot  
Talkin' that the heat put  
Plants in the bed but ...

#### Jay-Z, "Brooklyn's Finest"

Here, the repetition of "s" sounds establishes Jay-Z's command of his art form. Note that the "s" sound in cops is softer than the almost "z" sound in "is" and "Feds," and that these two sounds are related to each other but not identical.

Peep the style and the way the cops sweat us  
The number one question is, Can the Feds get us?



## WHY WRITERS USE IT

Consonance is used as an *intensifier* of language. This intensifying occurs in several ways.

- Consonance can make words more memorable. Alliterative consonance in particular is used very commonly in branding and advertising for exactly this reason (think of brand names like "Best Buy," "Coca Cola," and "Dunkin' Donuts").
- Consonance, like assonance, increases the sonic or "musical" quality of words in a group, making the words stand out to the reader. It also encourages the reader to spend more time looking at, sounding out, and thinking about those words.
- Because consonance encourages readers to pay more attention to language, it can have the effect of *slowing down* the reading process, and strengthening reading-comprehension as a result.
- Consonance is of special use to poets because it encourages repeated reading of a group of words. Poets' lines are often more dense with meaning, wordplay, and figures of speech than a typical line of prose is.
- Sometimes, consonant words can have special resonance with the meaning of the lines or sentences in which they occur. Many of the examples given above *imitate*, or *do*, the thing that is being described, rather than simply talking about it.



## OTHER RESOURCES

- [The Wikipedia entry on Consonance](#): A fairly detailed explanation of consonance, with examples.
- [The dictionary definition of Consonance](#): A short definition, with the relation of this literary concept to other fields, like music and science.

## HOW TO CITE

### MLA

Schlegel, Chris. "Consonance." LitCharts. LitCharts LLC, 17 May 2017. Web. 31 Aug 2017.

### Chicago Manual

Schlegel, Chris. "Consonance." LitCharts LLC, May 17, 2017. Retrieved August 31, 2017. <http://www.litcharts.com/literary-devices-and-terms/consonance>.